
An Unusual Welfare Plan

“When you reap the harvest in your field and overlook a sheaf in the field, do not turn back to get it; it shall go to the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow—in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings” (Deut. 24:19).

Care for the poor, those socially and economically vulnerable, is a recurrent theme in the Torah. A number of precepts make provision for their welfare: the release of debts, prohibition of usury, the poor man’s tithes, etc. What absorbs our attention here, however, is a different kind of welfare practice. Described in Deut. 24:19-21, the forgotten sheaf and other leftovers of the harvest are to be available to ‘the stranger, the fatherless, the widow’.

Read aloud Deuteronomy 24:19-21. Note the sound and flow of the text, the threefold repetitions: ‘do not...’ and ‘that shall go to the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow.’ And the meaning? Is this simply a humanitarian plan to ‘help the poor,’ or is a more complex message at work?

A sheaf left behind in the field is a small amount; hardly the way to satisfy the hunger of the poor. Similarly, the forgetfulness: accident is hardly a sure basis for a welfare plan.

Equally as puzzling is the reason given for the practice: “in order that the Lord your God may bless you [i.e., the owner of the field]” (24:19). Is it really a virtue, deserving of blessing, to support the poor through one’s forgetfulness? Note that this is the only precept in the Torah which is to be observed unconsciously rather than consciously. Really, how effectively can the poor be helped by a law that sanctions forgetfulness?

The Jewish sages pondered these questions and interpreted the precept in various ways. Here is a taste of three responses found in the tradition:

1. If a person is blessed by unintended good deeds, how much greater will be the reward for deliberate good deeds!

2. The poor man finds dignity by completing the harvesting and by taking sustenance directly from the earth rather than from the hand of the rich.
3. It is character-building for the owner of the field who ‘acquires a generous nature.’

How might this practice help the owner of the field to ‘acquire a generous character’? On this question Hirsch¹ is convincing. The gifts to the poor described in this Torah passage, says Hirsch, challenge the very concept of ‘Mine’. The owner of the field and vineyard is taught to regard himself as a steward of God’s blessing rather than trying to monopolise nature. The work of his hands must not be expended for the purpose of squeezing every last bit of produce for his own consumption. Even his *thoughts* of his labour must not be exclusively focused on his selfish good.

In other words, the main aim of the precept is to educate people (rich *and* poor, for the law applies to a poor man’s field too) in a fundamental attitude of gratitude, a generous mindset that places God at the centre of life. Through such formation of minds and hearts, the common good will be served and the poor will be treated with dignity and respect.

Reflection

Think of a situation in your life that helped (or is helping) you to ‘acquire a generous nature.’

Ask: What do I jealously guard as ‘mine’? A piece of clothing? An appliance? A section of the house? A particular seat at table? Is it really ‘yours’? Consider how you might share this gift/blessing with somebody else.

1. Hirsch: 19th c. German-Jewish rabbinical leader.

Sources: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* (New York, 2008); Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (New York, 1996); Montefiore & Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (New York, 1974); *JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1996). Scripture: NJPS.

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